Sarah Gale

CI 454E

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Unit Plan Rationale

Power and Leadership

In *Teaching English by Design*, Peter Smagorinsky writes that conceptual units can “help adolescents understand and make choices about problems they face in their lives” (2008, p.144). Conceptual units prepare students to be productive members of their communities, so they may “help construct a better society in the future” (Smagorinsky, 2008, p.145). This eight-week unit, entitled “Power and Leadership,” is a conceptual unit focusing on what it means to be a good leader. It includes an ongoing investigation regarding the difference between bullies and leaders, which will continually guide class discussion. The students will examine the themes in various texts, and will discuss ways to become leaders in their own communities.

Throughout the unit, I will lead discussions and debates regarding leadership, bullying, challenging authority, and the powers of language and art. I believe strongly in discovery learning, so although I will guide students through their evaluation of the issues, I will encourage them to learn through “active involvement with concepts and principles…to permit them to discover principles for themselves” (Slavin, 2012, p. 222).

I have chosen to pair two different, thematically related, pieces of literature. *The Giver*, a young adult novel by Lois Lowry, focuses on a young boy named Jonas, who is given a high honor in his community: he becomes the receiver of memories. Throughout his training, Jonas discovers the unethical realities of his community, and takes action to dismantle the system. The other piece of literature included is *Hamlet,* whichis a drama by William Shakespeare. Hamlet discovers upsetting information regarding the corrupt nature of his uncle, the king. He decides to take his uncle’s life, thereby changing the kingdom’s leadership. Both Hamlet and Jonas become leaders in their own ways, fighting against corrupt political systems. The common core includes a standard for high school seniors which requires students to identify the development of themes throughout a text (RL.11-12.2), so during the unit, we will focus on the reoccurring themes of power and leadership, and how the themes build throughout each text.

The reading for *Hamlet* will be conducted through Reader’s Theatre (Fisher & Frey, 2012, p.72). Each day of reading, I will assign students to read each role, and I will occasionally ask them to act out specific scenes. *The Giver* will be read mainly through shared reading, with some opportunities for students to read independently. Shared reading is extremely beneficial for students, because it works within their zone of proximal development, “thus, shared reading events allow teachers to address comprehension strategies through modeling” (Fisher & Frey, 2012, p. 61). Throughout both the Readers’ Theatre and shared reading activities, I will stop periodically to pose questions, focusing on the unit’s essential questions. To supplement the whole-class activities, students will engage in several small group discussions regarding the texts and related concepts. Working with partners and small groups allows students to engage in collaborative exploration that they might not be able to experience individually, or as a whole class (Bomer, 2011, p.35).

I chose to incorporate many forms of text in this unit, including informational text, non-fiction, film, visual art, and music. I believe this will help students connect with the themes of the unit, and examine leadership and power from many different perspectives. Although reading requires different skills than studying visual and audio texts, “they do share underlying motives, processes, and forms of thinking” (Bomer, 2011, p.47). I hope these various forms will help bridge the gap to higher levels of thinking, and a deeper understanding of the concepts.

Among the various texts included are several short videos, as well as one full length film. “Strain” is a short film which depicts a young lady in high school who experiences psychological bullying from her former female friends. This film will be a starting-point for a discussion regarding bullying. Another short film, “Skwerl,” illustrates what English might sound like to a non-English speaker. The audience has to rely on facial expressions and body language to make sense of what is happening. The film illustrates the power of language and the powerless feeling of not understanding. This topic is relevant to *The Giver*; the government in the novel monitors the language of the community, providing them with scripted responses for almost every situation. The government becomes a bully, using language-restriction as one way to take away the power of the individual.

I have included a video version of “The Allegory of the Cave” to illustrate the human tendency to reject unfamiliar ideas. Students will learn how important it is to appreciate diversity and be open-minded about different cultures, beliefs, and ideas. This discussion relates back to *The Giver*: in the novel, the government has taken away peoples’ ability to see color. Jonas begins to see color as he receives memories from generations past, and finds it difficult to understand and accept what he sees. Through this discussion, students will consider their own lives. Where do their values come from? Who has led them to believe what they believe?

Students will evaluate real leaders from history and the qualities that made them successful or unsuccessful as leaders. I will show a video of Martin Luther King, Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and ask the students to use his speech as a model to write their own “dream” speech: what would they want to change in the world if they had the chance, and how would they convince others to follow their lead? Excerpts from Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* will lead into a discussion regarding corrupt leadership. Both of these lessons will include a history mini-lesson to help put the texts in context of the political and social events of the time. This is an area that I would appreciate collaboration with history teachers.

I have included *A Few Good Men*, a full length film, which follows the story of three military attorneys as they defend two incarcerated soldiers. The soldiers committed a crime after following a command from their Colonel. I will use the film to segue from *The Giver* to *Hamlet* in a discussion about authority: when is it appropriate to question and disobey authority?

To bring the theme of leadership into reality, I have included a Forbes article called “Top 10 Qualities that Make a Great Leader.” The students will be asked to respond in their own “blog post,” describing the leadership qualities that they believe are beneficial. According to Smagorinsky, “one thing that students can do…as a way of engaging with the unit themes is to write, act, or otherwise produce a personal narrative in which they relate a significant event from their own lives” (2008, p.89). The blog entry, along with the “dream” speech mentioned above, are two of many low-stakes writing assignments I have included to help students personally connect with the content. In my opinion, students should write in class almost every day in a low-stakes, comfortable environment. These types of quick-writing assignments “can help students learn, understand, remember, and figure out what they don’t know” (Fisher & Frey, 2012, p.141). They also serve as a formative assessment, so I can assess the students’ progress.

As a high-stakes writing assignment, students will be required to write a narrative piece, envisioning how they might be a leader in the future. In order to scaffold this composition, I have included writing workshop days during which students will conduct their pre-writing, drafting, and editing. The workshop includes a lot of teacher assistance at the beginning, and less toward the end, “gradually turning responsibility over to them to operate on their own” (Slavin, 2012, p. 223). I will also conduct mini-lessons as needed while they are composing, because “in order for the teaching of reading and writing to have some place to stick…it’s important for students to be engaging in those activities where the teaching takes place” (Bomer, 2011, p. 13). During all of the workshop days, I will be available for individual conferences with students to assist them in any way I can.

Toward the end of the unit, I will segue into a discussion about becoming a leader through art—using art to change the world. At the end of *Hamlet*, Horatio tells the people that he will stand in front of a crowd and tell Hamlet’s story; in other words, he plans to put on a play. Art is often created in hopes of causing change, and I would like my students to understand how powerful art can be. To help illustrate this point, I have included two songs: “Let it Be” by The Beatles and “Blowing in the Wind” by Peter, Paul, and Mary. Both songs make a statement about life and war, and the idea of feeling powerless. I have also included two pieces of visual art: Pablo Picasso’s *Girl Before A Mirror* (1932) and *Rebirth* by Aaron Douglas

(1927). I will use the songs and the paintings as examples of artistic statements created to cause change. Leadership comes in all forms; leaders don’t always speak in public.

By completing this unit of study, students will become better equipped to discuss and write about themes in literature, and back up their analysis and opinions with specific evidence. They will also become more aware of the leaders in their own lives, how they can be leaders themselves, and how they can prevent those who seek power through bullying and unethical behavior.